

Joe Rouer's burger bar up in smoke

Landmark gutted, may be rebuilt

By Julie Bell and Randi Ostro

Press-Gazette

DUVALL — Joe Rouer and his family watched Monday with tears in their eyes as fire gutted the tavern they had turned into an area landmark.

It had been nearly 40 years since Rouer bought the tavern about two miles east of Dyckesville, named it after himself and began selling the special-recipe hamburgers that made it famous.

Monday, as he watched firefighters soak the remains of the building, he recalled that — during his first full year of operation in 1953 — he and his wife, Hel-



Joe Rouer
Years of burgers

en, sold 500 to 1,000 burgers. Grandson and tavern owner Michael Bultman recently had been selling about 80,000 a year.

The key was in the burgers.

The tavern purchased beef in quarters and halves, then ground up the choice cuts for serving. "The tenderloins, everything, goes in it," Betty Bultman said. Despite choice meat, the tavern didn't catch on to charging higher prices.

Joe Rouer's hamburgers originally sold for 50 cents, she said. Thirty-eight years later, they were up to a mere \$1.20.

But there was something else that made the place a bit different from an ordinary Wisconsin tavern. On any given night, you were just as likely to find families with children dining there as you were rowdy drinkers. Sometimes, the two ate side by side.

"It's very family oriented," Betty Bultman said. "I guess because we as a family ran it. . . ."

Michael Bultman had worked in the tavern since he was 15, she said. After Helen Rouer died in 1985, Joe Rouer decided to pass the operation on to his grandson.

When hunters such as Jeff Bellin of Casco and neighbors such as Roger Ferron stopped to watch the tavern burn Monday afternoon, there wasn't the

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The little tavern never advertised more than once annually in a weekly Kewaunee County newspaper, said Betty Bultman, Rouer's

daughter. Most customers came from Northeastern Wisconsin, but tourists also made Rouer's a regular vacation stop.



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

Landmark burns: Luxemburg firefighter Bob Kline, top, and an unidentified firefighter battle thick

sense of morbid curiosity so common among disaster watchers. Even the firefighters seemed to sense that something historic was happening.

"We had no trouble finding it," Luxemburg Fire Chief John DuChateau said wistfully after the blaze was out. "It was a landmark."

Twenty-five to 30 firefighters from Luxemburg, New Franken and Brussels fought the blaze after a neighbor reported it at 1:12 p.m., but DuChateau said they had no chance to save the building. It was engulfed when they arrived.

The fire is under investigation, but DuChateau said it probably started in the kitchen. Michael Bultman said a firefighter told him the "hot spot" was around the chimney.

Rouer, 83, lived in rooms at the rear of the tavern. He said he left Monday for

smoke during a Monday blaze that gutted Joe Rouer's hamburger-serving tavern in Duvall.

about a half hour, returning shortly after 1 p.m. to find his home and old business filled with thick smoke.

Whether the tavern will be rebuilt will depend on the insurance settlement, Michael Bultman said Monday. But his wife, Gay Sue, said the tavern eventually will re-open.

"It's what we did for a living," she said. "We were planning on redoing the bar this winter."

The Bultmans spent part of Monday afternoon wandering around the building, looking in its charred windows and crying.

"They'll have to bulldoze it down," said Marvin Malcore, whose father, Jule Malcore, opened the original tavern on the site in 1904. "It's all wrecked inside."

Mmmm! Joe Rouer's reopens soon!



Press-Gazette photo by Sandee Gerbers

Joe's new place: Owner Mike Bultman, left, and his grandfather, Joe Rouer, get ready for the May 1 opening of the new Joe Rouer's Bar in Duvall. The

bar is built on the site of the original Joe Rouer's, known throughout the area for its savory hamburgers. The old bar was destroyed by fire in November.

Joe's burgers are almost back

If you savor Joe Rouer's specialty, relax ... his new place opens May 1

By Don Langenkamp

Press-Gazette

DUVALL— Joe Rouer and Mike Bultman are living proof that nothing can keep a good hamburger down.

Grandfather and grandson stood side by side Wednesday outside a brand-new Joe Rouer's Bar and laid final plans for their May 1 reopening.

Joe's, a culinary landmark at this Kewaunee County crossroads, was gutted by fire Nov. 19.

Nearly four decades of juicy, succulent, large, inexpensive burgers went up in smoke. A small army of Joe's customers was left drooling.

From the year-round regulars in the Dyckesville area to customers throughout Northeastern Wisconsin, to the summer hordes from Milwaukee and Chicago, the news spread: Joe's burgers were on the back burner.

Would they stay there?

"Only until our insurance company came through," says Mike, 26, the bar's owner since 1987. "Then we knew we'd rebuild."

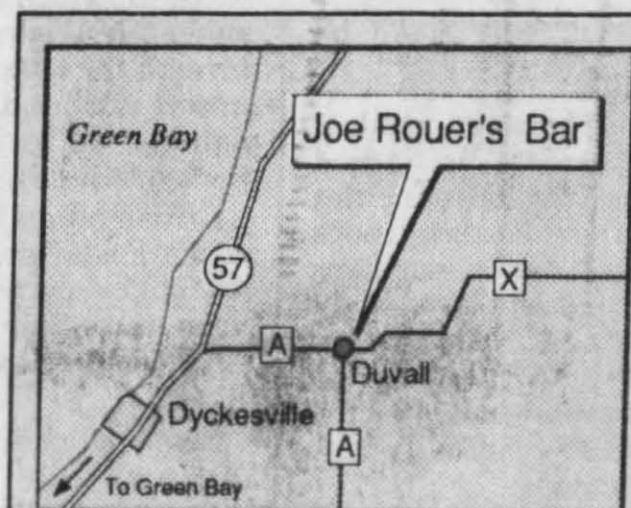
Joe, 83, stands nearby as Mike talks. A car rolls through the lot and the driver yells, "Can I get a burger?"

"Not 'til next Wednesday," Mike yells back.

"Like last Sunday," Joe says, characteristically starting his sentence in mid-sentence. "I was just hanging around, and close to 100 cars came by and stopped."

The new building bears little resemblance on the outside to its predecessor. It is set back from the crossroads and the new parking lot will hold 35 cars.

Please see **Joe's/A-2**



Press-Gazette map by Joe Heller

About Joe Rouer's

Destroyed by fire: Nov. 19, 1990

Reopening: May 1

Location: At junction of Kewaunee County A and X, about 15 miles northeast of Green Bay.

Cost of a hamburger: \$1.25

Cost of a cheeseburger: \$1.40

Joe's

It is new from the basement up. It is slightly more than 2,000 square feet — about 100 square feet smaller than the old one. But it will seat 65 instead of 45.

Joe, who with his late wife, Helen, opened the place in 1952, will again live in quarters behind the bar.

He is ready to start again.

"I'll work as long as my health holds up," says the man who ran the kitchen while his wife poured the shots.

"He'll work as much as he wants to," Mike says.

Mike is striving to maintain as much tradition as possible in a situation where every keepsake, every memento, went up in flames.

Tradition such as:

- Low prices. He figures he'll take the plunge and raise the hamburger price a nickel to \$1.25, but hold the \$1.40 line on cheeseburgers. A tap beer will go up a nickel to 45 cents — "because of the new tax," Mike says.

- Same recipe. Mike will buy hind quarters of beef and have steaks and everything ground into hamburger. That's always been Joe's secret.

"Grandpa used to buy cows from farmers around here and grind up

the whole cow, but sometimes they were the cows the farmers didn't want anymore," Mike says, referring to the old days.

- A family operation. The work force is Mike, Joe, "and my mother, my wife, my sister-in-law and my sister," Mike says.

- Same frying pans. The kitchen will be new, but Joe salvaged his frying pans and keeps what he calls his "secret seasoning" in his head.

Still, Mike knows there will be doubters. Hamburger gourmets are a fickle bunch. Convincing them that the product hasn't changed will take some doing.

"The recipe's the same, the meat's the same, the cooks are the same and the frying pans are the same," he says. "Everything's the same but the building. But some people will say they taste different."

Mike talks fondly of his record year in 1987 when he sold 96,000 hamburgers. He talks about how lucky he was to have the fire occur in the winter, when the average month was 3,000 burgers, instead of the summer, when the norm is 12,000 a month.

The phone rings. Mike answers, but a recording would serve the purpose just as well.

"Sorry, we're not open yet. Next Wednesday, May first."